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# Perfectly Clear?

## Smith 'responds' on Helms' 'leak'

*Following is an exchange of letters between Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of The Washington Post, and William French Smith, attorney general of the United States.*

May 24, 1984

Dear Mr. Attorney General:

I have long had an interest in national security violations, as you must imagine. For more than 20 years in this city I have watched various people in the White House and in the Pentagon and in the State Department and in your office do battle with journalists and others on this subject.

I am now trying to remember an apparent national security violation as significant as the recent revelation by Sen. Jesse Helms that the CIA had bought the election in El Salvador for [José Napoleón] Duarte.

I wonder if you know of any in your time in this town. Your answer could be off the record, if you wish, although I would obviously prefer it on the record.

Most sincerely,  
BEN BRADLEE

June 12, 1984

Dear Mr. Bradlee:

I am writing in response to your letter dated May 24, 1984, which unfortunately did not reach the department until May 30.

As you note, administrations of both political parties have expressed concern for many years over the unauthorized disclosure of national security information. The unauthorized disclosure of properly classified national security information is a serious problem that affects not only the capabilities of our intelligence services, but also the safety of the military and of our intelligence agents and those who assist them.

Until the last decade, efforts to prevent unauthorized disclosures were confined almost exclusively to the executive branch. Since the early seventies, however, both the legislative and judicial branches have formally recognized their responsibilities in this area. In passing the Clas-

sified Information Procedures Act, Congress specifically authorized the chief justice to prescribe rules for the protection of classified information in the custody of the courts, and he has done so. Similarly, in establishing the Senate Select Committee on Intelli-

gence and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, each house of Congress embodied rules for the protection of classified information in the actions creating the committees.

While none of the systems designed to prevent unauthorized disclosure has been fully effective, the combined efforts of all three branches of government offer a better prospect of success in protecting vital national security information than the efforts of the executive branch would acting alone.

Only a greater individual sense of responsibility for the security of the nation on the part of everyone who comes into contact with national security information can ensure its protection. I am therefore especially heartened by your interest in this area. The press has a role of its own to play — by considering, as well as the newsworthiness of its stories, the threat to our security that an unauthorized disclosure can create. Indeed, it would be helpful if more members of the press would recognize that they have a responsibility as citizens to consider fully and fairly the national security implications of their professional pursuits. Independent of legal requirements, the same goes for all citizens, both in and out of government.

Sincerely,  
WILLIAM FRENCH SMITH  
Attorney General